

Author's Talk

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It has taken me a decade to write this book, or rather to rewrite it after an illustrated version called, *We Need to Talk About Contemporary Art* was turned down by the visual art publishers in the UK and America. They often said that it would have created healthy debate but that it was not in line with their publishing programme, which of course included publishing books on contemporary art. One of my conclusions is that contemporary art is an oxymoron, so it is perhaps not a surprise that I never got that book published: you can find it on Academia.edu. At least I can lay claim to some honour here, the honour of being cancelled!

How on earth can I say that contemporary art is a contradiction in terms? Do I mean everything being produced today is aesthetically worthless? Well, no, not at all, and I am preparing another book entitled *Let Us Now Praise Real Art* to make the point that genuine art can be and has been made during the period since 1960. It is just that such art is not the sort of thing that I would argue everybody understands by the term 'contemporary art'. I mean by 'contemporary art' work produced on certain foundational ideas that developed especially in the 1960s around pop art, minimalism and post-minimalism, conceptual and issue-based art.

I have just listed some art movement labels, but I want to suggest that the term 'contemporary art' is quite a Johnny-come-lately label which on one level is a default term after labels based on movements and groupings became obsolete.

Why don't I just give you the Tate Contemporary definition and we can take it from there:

'The term 'contemporary art' is loosely used to refer to art of the present day and of the relatively recent past, of an innovatory or avant-garde nature'.

Since each period has its contemporaneity and since the term 'contemporary' art clearly does not mean 'the best of all art done today', the key words in this definition, the only ones that count, are 'innovatory' and 'avant-garde'. It seems to me problematic to use the term 'avant-garde' today, when its original use referred to a period of commercial and institutional neglect and ideological resistance. Clearly the commercial and institutional validation of contemporary art should rule out the use of the term avant-garde. So we are left with the notion of innovation, which could be anything from material qualities and presentation to research originality or new political ideas. Recognising originality is what art-power sees as its job, given the benighted rest-of-society. So try this for a definition instead of the Tate's: contemporary art is the real art of today for a future art-history as envisaged by the likes of the Tate. *Contemporary art is the future's real art as defined by art-power today.*

Contemporary art has to start 'conversations' in 'the culture', two awful sets of words. The first (conversations) is a linguistic metaphor and replaces relatively

determinate aesthetic effect with the indeterminate metaphor of open chattering. The 'Overton window' of the chat is obviously controlled from above, as is the point of the chat. The second term ('the culture') takes us to a whole set of ideas nodding to anthropology, sociology, and the cultural studies movement of the 1960s.

Art was elitist and popular or mass culture was, well, popular and therefore politically good. No matter that this approach flew in the face of anthropology's analysis of objects and practices with different cultural status. No matter that mass culture was fabricated *for* the masses (as business product) and was not made *by* the masses. No matter that a belief in a long front of culture has ended with artists today mimicking commercial production of goods and even getting into bed with ordinary commerce. No matter that a strong case can still be made for the distinction between the individual and the social, the private and the public, and the necessity for art to maintain a certain separate space for the exploration of personal experience.

The essential impetus for art-making requires the operation of a real cultural medium such as painting, poetry, music, the novel or film, all of which have sets of cultural conventions developed over long periods of time. This is what is meant by a developing tradition, and this is what contemporary art rejects from the get-go. It wrongly associates 'medium' with now-antiquated debates about formalism back in the 1960s. No art comes totally unformed. Some practices have an element of design in them, but that is totally different from a relatively determinate aesthetic effect within a proper art medium, an effect which is not aimed at in advance but is the end result of some motivated *élan* (what aestheticians clumsily call 'intention').

You may have noticed that I have just run through the content range of what contemporary art tends to call sneeringly 'traditional aesthetics'. I know that there is plenty of claiming by art bureaucrats or practitioners who fancy being heads of department that it is time for a 'new aesthetics'. That is simply not so, nor should the term 'traditional' ever be associated with categories of thought which are still operative in real art.

The terms are still operative because they represent the different aspects or stages of art-making *per se*. Intention, form and expression, in other words, the bringing into being of an intentional wrought and aesthetically effective image, are categories that reflect the creative process itself. All the elements are necessary, all together. Form without experience is empty, expression without form fails, and claims to aesthetic effect end up looking artificial and forced if not made vivid by a sense of real experience. None of these are regarded as unproblematic in the culture out of which contemporary art emerged.

There is always something in those queryings, and something deeply wrong in where the debate finishes. Expression, for example, was said to be a fallacy because the system of expression was culturally formed. The conclusion should have been instead that the cultural conventions of expression were performed with by the individual artist, that expression was enculturated but certainly was not a fallacy. Instead expression became a no-no.

Contemporary art has scrambled thinking around the main elements of art practice for so long that it is guaranteed failure in advance. Instead of the notion

of a medium with conventions developed through time, we have the depthless model of communication-systems. That model is rooted in semiology, and its metaphors are always textual. Following logically from the idea of the 'open text' and the 'deferral' of aesthetic meaning, the *intertextual* and *contextual* dominate as concepts. The first (the intertextual) encourages cross-referencing, as if accumulations of reference produce artistic profundity by themselves: paradoxically, while such an idea seems to privilege the person responding to art, the spectators' construction of their own meanings from the artwork, in practice complexity of referencing gives enhanced authority to the key artworld commentator, usually the curator. The emphasis on the contextual at the same time drains away the impulse to make a relatively determinate artwork at all in the first place. Context is made to do an awful lot of work today that should have been the job of the creative artist.

In 2015, the Museum of Modern Art in New York put on an exhibition *Take an Object*. The title actually derived from a 1964 notebook instruction to himself written by the artist Jasper Johns, which read thus:

'Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. (Repeat)'

The Museum of Modern Art was recognizing the dominance within modern art of a notion of using ready-made elements and then passing those elements or objects through a simple (and arguably not artistic) process.

Most of you will know that this term and practice originated with Marcel Duchamp and his interest in how much context can affect looking at an object (and his misguided assumption that that interest could pass for aesthetic interest). We know that this gave rise ultimately to the 'institutional theory of art' in which those with art-power were meant to make whatever they wanted into art by the simple act of nominating it as interesting art. What I am keen to draw attention to is the fact that doing something to an object and linking various objects together is justified today in semiotic terms, whereby the objects and processes are conceived as generating second-order meanings, or even third- or more- order meanings.

While all this is taken for granted as part of art today, we suppress the fact that there is no real creative process going on here because assisted objects (to use Duchamp's terms) have replaced any actual artistic medium. There is no process of interplay possible between the maker and medium that (by manipulating artistic conventions) allows for expressive processing and clear aesthetic apprehension. As spectators, we're not being taken through a transformative experience anymore than the artist is. The great American aesthete Monroe Beardsley talked about how, in the real world of art, we are willingly guided through a succession of mental states by the objective qualities and relations in the aesthetic experience on which our attention is fixed. In experiencing the work of art, we have a sense that things are working or have worked themselves out fittingly ('Aesthetic Experience' in Michael Wreen and Donald Callen, eds, *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1982, 285-97).

My rather brutal conclusion then is that contemporary art may have immensely complicated and costly procedures of manufacture, but these are not *actually* genuine artistic processes, processes usually typified by some sort of journey towards an expressive symbolization in the psychological sense. So, a

determinately expressive artwork encapsulating a felt response to real experience is impossible.

Surely that is too limited a view of art? Surely art has now become more interesting, more relevant for people, even more popular? In my book, I make much of the need to compare how we think about art with what is involved in poetry, if only as a mental exercise. A poem has a certain quality of language that makes it create its own imaginative space for us. It does not require a different non-aesthetic approach to words or a grand presentation in an innovative way, a new aesthetics to go with it and justify it, not even a new issue-based approach (and here I part company from Simon Armitage who seems to believe that poetry must become an instrumental wing of climate alarmism).

It is also worth pondering at the significance of poetry for us at certain moments of our life (moments of falling in love or grieving death). It is worth thinking about how many people around the world derive deep satisfaction from either writing or reading poetry, even though coverage of poetry in the media is so negligible and how little impact it makes in 'the culture'. Finally, consider how much better a poet one becomes by pursuing poetry to a much higher level of postgraduate education and getting a doctorate in it. I hope your reaction is to say, 'well, that simply isn't the case, and doing poetry-writing within the *habitus* of knowledge-production might actually not be the way to deal with the poetic muse: writing in such a context might actually change what you regard as poetry, as in Mr. Armitage's hankering for issue-based poetry.'

I think you can see where I am going with this in advance. To be a validated practicing artist today, you need to have a master in fine arts. Without going through the whole history of the training of artists, I would just make the obvious point that art colleges were swallowed up by polytechnics and universities, and had to fit into that *habitus*. To teach within the modern university, you are expected to orientate yourself towards personal research, which the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) defines as artistic 'invention...where these lead to new or substantially improved insights'. Thus, artistic practice is identified with knowledge creation, even though there is no method for yielding truth in the knowledge sense (no means whatsoever to quantify 'insights'). Art doesn't create knowledge, though it might reinforce it. It simply won't do to redefine a perfectly understandable term 'knowledge' to mean moral understanding or even wisdom. There may be wisdom exemplified in art works, but such wisdom tends to be ordinary and situated, part of an exploration of experience. Art is about experience, not knowledge-creation, and so is not suitably placed within the research ambience of the modern university.

One conclusion here is that art has been changed for the worst, perhaps even destroyed, by the modern university. That context involved the continual navel gazing at the role of the artist, continual testing of the notion and boundaries of art. Theorization is installed right at the outset, and art students are directed towards 'issues'. What is going on in the art tends to have nothing to do with a material practice, a real medium of art. This is obviously what people mean when they accuse the art rightly of being conceptual.

However, it is far worse than simply that. The whole activity is an ongoing project that is not required to arrive at a singular aesthetic shape which operates and is

comprehensible within an inherited artistic medium. Medium is replaced usually by a sprawl of technical supports. Achieving a poignant artistic configuration is even treated with a certain suspicion, and a notion of deferral of aesthetic effect or meaning obtains everywhere.

One can say, well, the nature of art has changed, but one should be open to a critical discussion about the benefits or not of such change, and I see no signs at all of any serious debate within the modern university about that. Indeed, just the reverse. Art as issue or theory has to reinforce itself all the time in order to congratulate itself on its own pursuit of ethical virtue.

When the Marxist *October* magazine searched for the causation of contemporary art in autumn of 2009, its editorial introduction was completely blind to the academization of art, of which its theoretical polemics were themselves the product. For all its alternative politics, the magazine could not understand contemporary art as a product of academic institutionalization. Instead it reached for two other explanations for contemporary art, money and globalization.

My book doesn't actually discuss those topics, and I will explain why. There is plenty of free-floating capital investment, and it certainly supports and feeds on a notion of 'cutting-edge art' (note the product and design innovation metaphor) however, such money does not create the foundational principles of the art practice. Such money bought Victorian subject-painting and Hudson-River landscape in the late 19th century, and today buys its opposite, whether impressionist landscape or the extremes of post-art.

Globalization implies post-modern cultural hybridization, but this is only one minor feature of contemporary art. Consider the terms first-world and third-world and ask yourself what that implies about the 'triumph of the West'. Contemporary art is very much the product of the 'First World' even as it thematizes what it now calls the 'Global South'. The only way in which globalization impacts contemporary art (apart from the globalized economic spread of commercial galleries, museums, and art fairs) is in terms of the institutional triumph of a set of 'good society' values, globalized, cosmopolitan, international, human rights based, multi-cultural and ultra-liberal.

This brings us to the context of a new 'imperial' world order without landgrab or overt control, as described by Hardt and Negri in their 2000 study *Empire*. There is a lot to ponder in their notion of a new power system, and it brings us to the classic idea of the 'public sphere', which Jurgen Habermas saw as having shifted from interaction and debate to the domination of passive consumption. There is a fit between the theorizing pseudo progressivism of the academic elites and that of the bureaucratic elites installed within different sorts of governance, within cultural institutions, within museums and libraries, and within the media.

As an example of such public sphere management, take the record of the Tate's stances activities under the direction of Maria Balshaw as described in her 2024 book *Gathering of Strangers*. The modern museum is there to reach out, bring in and inform, or you could put it in another way and say 'to form ideologically'. One of the major themes of her book is the championing of 'climate emergency' which the Tate declared in 2009, kicking out BP sponsorship, committing itself to decarbonizing, to reducing carbon footprint of exhibitions and even to conserving

art works less. The manifesto book is characterized by race politics, white-shaming, intersectional associating of colonialism, industrialization, and climate-catastrophism, gender-criticality, and a celebration of indigenous peoples.

In typical woke fashion, the showing of art is not enough in itself: as Balshaw says in her book, “it has become clear over recent years that ‘sticking with the paintings’ doesn’t really cut it any longer in terms of meeting the needs of a wider public” (Balshaw, 2024, 120). The museum curator knows the public for art and that it does not want to come to a gallery to see art. Or rather, the curator wants to hail the public, or sections of it, the sections amenable to being interpellated, to being brought to the right issues of the day. Art curatorship must be activist, must be promoting a notion of the public good in terms of promulgating ‘good society’ values over those of the benighted ‘rest-of-society’.

What interests me here is the way that our museum institutions are changing the nature of art in line with the effects of academic institutionalization and its theorization of art. That latter theorization had already set up “the expanded field of art” (to use Rosalind Krauss’ term) to cover moves out of minimalism into the environment. That scrambling of art into a post-art openness allowed for anointed élites to fill the art-arena with moral and social issues, issues that conformed to one side of an increasingly polarized public sphere, one side of the “culture wars”. I demonstrate this in the book with a detailed examination of the intersectional woke activism of Manchester Art Gallery, where there hangs a gold frame waiting symbolically to be filled by a female black artist on a suitable intersectional ideological issue.

My point is that the élite artworld is acting like the 18th century aristocratic patron calling forth by patronage the art it requires for the ideology of the public sphere. That has completely changed the relationship between art and art institution. Independence has become co-dependence. The aesthetic dimension has been disappeared into an anaesthetic ethics or politics. Gone is the debate about the relationship between art and morality, since the latter has simply swallowed up the former. Here are the words of the French critic Aude de Kerros which seem to me to be entirely apt.

“Bureaucrats, university teachers and scribes established an ‘historic’ agreement with the media, collectors and the upper echelons of the art market...[servicing a] hegemonic, uncontested world...These governing classes believe there exists no art or thinking outside of the ‘historic accord’” (De Kerros, *L’Imposture de l’art contemporain*, 2015, 244).

We have seen then the scrambling of core ideas about embodying personal responses to experience in an artistic medium, about creating an aesthetic space in which (to use Laurence Oliver’s words) the “secrets and the knowledge of the human heart” can be told “without too much disguise but without too much directness either” so that “the world know itself” (ABC interview with Dick Vavett, 1973). We have seen the querying of working out of personal experience itself. We have seen ideas about that experience only being a culturally determined text, about the superiority of delving into theoretical or ethical issues to be communicated through a communication model of intertextuality. We have seen the undoing of art sealed by this cross-legitimization of contemporary

practices by art-educational formation, public museum and commercial artworld power.

In 2015 I read a French book by Fabrice Nicolini entitled (to translate its title) *Letters to a Peasant on the Vast Shit-Heap that Agriculture Has Become*. With its thematic chapters delving into the different historic factors ruining French postwar agriculture, this book gave me my method for this book and also its original disallowed title. No Matter. I am hardly the first writer though to come to the sort of conclusion that “contemporary art” is an oxymoron and that it does not work as art, whatever it may work as, from entertainment and spectacle to social work or consciousness-raising. Consider the litany of analyses, starting with Peter Fuller’s 1980s criticisms of the current lack of subjective expression and cultural imagination through a medium. Consider in the 1990s David Hickey’s criticisms of anaesthesia and institutionalization,, David Lee’s moniker of “state art” or Jean Baudrillard’s accusation of aesthetic nullity. Consider Julian Spalding’s condemnation of the eclipse of artistic learning and achievement, or Donald Kuspit’s description of present-day practice as post-art, Roger Scruton’s description of it as “pretend-art”, Brian Sewell’s assessment of current institutional practice as “the business of the circus freak managed by the circus barker”. Consider the considerable European critiquing of contemporary art (Derivery, de Kerros, Ullrich, Cauwet, Sourgins, Le Brun, Antille).

All these deeply serious critiques should have had a devastating impact in any culture where rational conversation and true critical thinking were valued. Instead they were so much water off a duck’s back, which already tells us so much about the so-called artistic currents of our time and their over-determination. Meanwhile, outside of this framework, art continues being made. I hope that, when it is finished, you will all buy my follow-on text in preparation, *Let Us Now Praise Real Art: Critical Appreciations of Art Since 1960*.